

Smiling Sibbick is 'the talk of the toon'

Toby Sibbick sent his opponent the wrong way inside his own half late in the UEFA Europa Conference League clash with Latvian side RFS at Tynecastle, and fans in the 15,800-plus crowd stood to chant his name.

The 23-year-old played a starring role during the game which Hearts edged 2-1 and his facial expression spoke volumes at the final whistle when it was announced that he was the Man of the Match.

Change indeed as recently the Isleworth-born defender has suffered criticism for a section of the Jambo faithful.

His manager, Robbie Neilson, told the post-match media briefing that he was delighted for the 6ft 2in player who arrived at Tynecastle after playing 51 games for Barnsley and, before that, 26 for AFC Wimbledon.



Toby Sibbick training with Hearts PHOTO Nigel Duncan 26.10.2022
Sibbick also had a short loan spell at Belgian side Oostende but more performances like the one against the Latvian side may help him cement a place in the Hearts side moving forward.

Neilson said: "Toby has had a hard time recently and he has probably not hit the levels that we wanted to consistently, we've had flashes of what we saw tonight, but he has to maintain that, he has worked hard and, to his credit, he took his opportunity in European football to perform like that. He has to maintain the aggression, the intensity and the concentration level. There is no doubting his ability."

He was not the only player deserving of praise in this entertaining contest played on a perfect night for football. Josh Ginnelly was a constant threat on either flank and Andy Halliday was rock in midfield with Barry McKay showing his ability on the ball.

Striker Lawrence Shankland also helped out in defence when required and, overall, this was a team performance worthy of

note, something Neilson addressed with the media.

He was particularly pleased with the way the whole team showed they were desperate to win, a point exemplified by the final few minutes when 11 men were behind the ball.

Before the match at Tynecastle VIDEO Nigel Duncan

The manager, however, said he was disappointed that his charges turned the ball over as much as they did and he warned: "If we do that next week against Istanbul then we will be in trouble.

"You have to work back as we did, but you need better quality in possession. This campaign is a learning curve and, at this level, you have to work and you have to have that better quality in possession."

He added: "The biggest thing for me is hearing the fans roar and we got that roar which kicked us on. RFS, in the first 15 minutes, when we got that intensity and the fans got that intensity, struggled."

The match facts are that neat interplay between Jorge Grant and Josh Ginnelly down the right saw the ball flash across the box and Shankland swept in to prod the ball home from close range after three minutes.

And Halliday fired home Hearts' second from the edge of the penalty box in the 12th minute, drilling a low shot past Pavels Steinbors and into the bottom right-hand corner of the net. The Boys in Maroon in the packed terraces were jumping.

Grant then forced a diving stop from the RFS goalkeeper as Hearts continued to dominate and Kingsley almost netted No 3 with a curling free-kick but Steinbors saved and RFS were gaining a foothold.

Craig Gordon was called into action to save Hearts, but the Scotland hot-stop could do nothing to prevent a rocket, right-

foot shot from Kevin Freisenbichler bulging the net after 39 minutes.

There was no more scoring but, overall, Hearts had 15 shots against nine, six of them on target. RFS had two on target.

The home side also enjoyed 62 per cent of possession against 38 per cent from their opponents who had 361 passes against 594 by Hearts.

Sadly, Hearts' narrow win, which took them to six points in the four-strong group, having won 2-0 in Latvia against RFS, leaves them third as Italian side Fiorentina beat Group A leaders, Istanbul Basaksehir 2-1 despite the Turkish side having taken the lead after 14 minutes.

Serbian star Luka Jovic, the Italian side's former Real Madrid player, once reported to be valued at Euros 60m, claimed two goals, after 26 and 61 minutes, to win the game.

Manager Neilson said he was delighted with the first 20 to 25 minutes against RFS and added: "We started the game really, really well and had a lot of intensity and got the fans behind us and we managed to get two goals, but we kind of took our foot off the gas a wee bit, and allowed RFS to get into the game and we lost a fantastic goal and we never really got control after that which was disappointing."

He added: "We target trying to win every game. How realistic that is I don't know, but we have to go into games with that mentality that we are going to win it, but we are delighted to get the two wins (in the group) which is great for the players to have that belief that we can play at this level and win at this level."

Neilson looked forward to Sunday and their cinch Scottish Premiership clash at Ross County which he said was massive. The manager added: "We have to get our league campaign kick-started before we go to Istanbul."

Stephen Kingsley, who had been so steady against RFS, came off after 67 minutes after tweaking a hamstring and Neilson said he would be assessed in the next couple of days.

He added: "It is disappointing and it is one niggle after another, but guys have come in and done really well and we will see how we are for Sunday."